

Biological nature determine gender sociology essay

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External Assessment To what extent does biological nature determine gender identity formation? Extended Essay

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Abstract When a baby is born, the main question asked is, " Is it a boy or a girl?" As the baby develops, the ways in which it is treated are influenced by its sex. In time, the growing child's thoughts about himself/herself and his/her place in the world are likely to depend, in part, on its biological sex. However they may also depend on other environmental factors that play a part in determining his/her gender. This research paper has sought to explore: to what extent does biological nature determine gender identity formation? Three theories of gender development i. e. sociobiological, biosocial and social learning were analysed and evaluated in order to establish how gender identity differences are initiated and to what extent each variable, biological nature or nurture environment, drives and influences the cognitive development of a child. In summary, it is the interaction of these variables that helps shape a child's cognitive development. While biological nature does certainly determine some aspects

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of gender, gender identity itself is produced in the interaction of biological sex and the environmental and cultural circumstances in which psychological development occurs. So, biological nature only determines gender identity formation to a certain extent as the theories give multiple explanations as to the cause of gender identity formation, not just one. Word Count: 213

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..... 13IntroductionFor decades the nature-nurture debate has raged among the policy-makers, educationalists and scientists of our time. Each raises the question about how a child's gender identity is formed. Most theorists do not see biological nature and the nurture environment as being independent of one another, but choose to focus on the interaction between these variables and how this manifests in the formation of gender identity. To what extent biological factors determine gender formation and development differs however, and forms the basis from which most research is undertaken. In order to examine the interaction between these variables and gender identity, we first need to take a look at what they actually mean: Biological nature represents an individual's biological status and refers to their biological sex (i. e., sexual characteristics, female or male) and their genetic makeup (i. e., inherited characteristics such as academic intelligence, physical traits and a propensity for illness whether physical or mental). The nurture environment is the sum of environmental factors that influence a person's traits and behaviours. An individual's gender identity refers to the psychological characteristics associated with feeling male or female (i. e., femininity, masculinity and androgyny) expressed as an active, cognitive process that is defined as a person's internal experience of gender. This interaction of biology and environment on an individual's internal experience of gender is therefore significant and worthy of investigation. We have been witnessing a worldwide shift in social attitudes to the question of

gender stereotyping, with previous assumptions of gender identity now under review, the current dichotomy between the sexes could one day become a relic of the past. However, in order to generate a paradigm shift within all levels of society toward a more neutral standpoint where all gender roles are seen as equally valid, we must first ask the question: to what extent does biological nature determine gender identity formation? Extended Essay The 'nature-nurture' debate is of consequence to developmental psychology. That is, to what extent is behavioural development influenced or controlled by biological factors or experiential factors, and how do these factors interact with each other? The approaches to gender development can be summarized as the biological (nature) and socialization (nurture) (Ruble et al., 2006). This psychological approach suggests that young children become increasingly aware of the standard characteristics and behaviours associated with each sex, they begin to form self-constructed schemas, referred to as gender schemas, about the traits and behaviours of males or females. As these schemas are self-constructed, their content may vary considerably from one individual to another. Gender development is very complex, and there are no simple relationships among its various components. The several theoretical perspectives highlight different parts of the process of gender development: how they influence and drive a child's cognitive development and how they interact with one another, sometimes amplifying each other's effects. In order to come to its conclusions, the essay examines the two approaches to gender development. The first approach is biological, whereby two theories will be examined: sociobiological theory and biosocial theory. The second approach is socialization, whereby one theory

will be examined: social learning theory. The biological approach of gender development examines the influence of genes and chromosomes, sex hormones, and brain organization on sex differences in physical functioning and behaviour (Hoyenga & Hoyenga, 1993); it including the evolutionary theory, which examines the influence of human beings' evolutionary history on sex differences in behaviour (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Kenrick & Luce, 2000). The socialization approach emphasizes the differential treatment of children by parents, family members, peers, teachers and others (Fagot, Rodgers, & Leinbach, 2000; Ruble et al., 2006). The socialization approach is rooted in the tradition of learning theory, which examines the influence of reinforcements, punishments, and observational learning on behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

Gender Roles and Differences

Physical development, as a male or female is merely one aspect of sexual development, it should be noted that social development is likewise important. Gender roles are "cultural expectations about the way in which men and women should think and behave"[1], and relating to this, gender stereotypes are "beliefs about differences in the behaviours, abilities and personality traits of males and females"[2]. The origin and nature of gender differences has been a controversial topic in psychology (Eagly, 1995; Shibley Hyde and Plant, 1995). Part of this stems from the way the differences between males and females are measured, how great those differences appear to be, and part of it from the socio-political implications of these differences; for instance, sexism.

Sociobiological Theory

Sociobiologists argue that gender has gradually evolved over the course of human development, as part of our broader adaptation to the environment (Lumsden & Wilson, 1983). Both

sexes have developed different roles as a function of their respective contributions to reproduction and domestic labour (Wilson, 1978; Hoyenga & Hoyenga, 1979). More precisely, according to this school of thought, traditional gender roles provide the basis for the forming of an individuals' gender identity. A male, due to his larger and stronger physique was regarded apt for hunting and defending; whereas a female, due to her child-rearing obligations, pregnancy and menstruation, was seen as being better suited to taking on domestic responsibilities (Betz, 1993). This distinctive division of labour has resulted in higher rates of survival, according to Murdock (1937) and hence maximised reproductive potential. According to the parental investment theory (Kenrick, 1994) in sociobiological approaches, females invest considerably more into reproduction than males do. Society evolved to be organised in sexually exclusive domestic partnerships as a way of meeting both sexes' needs. The consequence of this was the evolution of different courtship displays and corresponding gender roles. We draw upon the work of anthropologists of gender relation such as Mead (1935) to consider this tension in sociobiological approaches. Cross-cultural studies have supplied evidence that there are universal similarities in gender behaviour, which supports the sociobiological theory. For example, Mead's (1935) study of three cultural groups in New Guinea indicated that while some differences between the genders remained constant across cultures, in many ways gender roles differed widely in different cultures. According to Margaret Mead[3], among the Arapesh, both sexes were " peaceful in temperament and neither men nor women made war", but that among the Mundugumor, " the opposite was true: both men

and women were warlike in temperament" and that the Tchambuli gender roles were the opposite of roles in Mead's own home culture - early 20th century America. We might understand from this evidence, that there are genders which could be explained by experiential factors as opposed to biological, inherited ones. However, Mead herself reported higher levels of aggression among males within each cultural group. Even in the Tchambuli, where gender roles were seemingly reversed to the Western eye, it was the males who fought primarily in war. In addition, the findings lack consistency. Deborah Gewertz (1981) studied the Tchambuli (1974-1975), and found no evidence of such reversed gender roles; stating that as far back in history as there is evidence (1850's) Tchambuli males dominated over females. Her study supports the idea of inherited gender role behaviours. However, in contrast to this, Williams and Best (1992) found that such consensus was strongest in collectivist societies and weaker in individualist societies where gender equality is more influential. This again, suggests a cultural difference - the effect of different socialisation practises. The overt, naturalistic observations conducted by Mead took an etic approach to studying the natives; the researcher used her Western cultural background to study other cultures i. e. notions of masculinity and femininity prevalent in the West, to document gender roles in Non-Western cultures. To describe the Arapesh as feminine attaches a western construct to a set of behaviours, this may be unique to the Arapesh. It has strong ecological validity, as the research was not conducted in an artificial environment i. e. the conditions were not controlled and extraneous variables (potentially confounding) were not eliminated; so the participants' behaviours were less likely to change. But it

lacks in population validity, a type of external validity, i. e. the results were not representative of the general population, at the time. Meaning she looked at a discrete tribal hierarchy, in a fixed, isolated location. This acts as a limitation, when trying to generalize the sample. The study might also lack in internal validity, i. e. there could be other cause that explains her observations such as social influences. Since all the tribal women assumed the same role, and there were no deviations noted, this suggests that their behaviour might have been as a result of conforming to a defined social construct. This could be explained by Piaget's theory of moral development. Moral behaviour is behaviour that " conforms to a generally accepted set of rules", which in this case is gender identity. He suggests that children got through two stages: moral realism and morality of cooperation. Of particular interest is the first stage, mortal realism, consisting of egocentrism and blind adherence to the rules i. e. assuming gender roles in accordance with that culture. Children have not yet understood that many of these rules are social conventions that may be altered by mutual consent. In addition, Mead was criticized for reporting findings that seemed custom-built for her theory; whereby she assumed each culture represented a different type within her theory, and she disregarded or downplayed information that might have made her classifications untenable. So, one could argue, in accordance with Mead's study, that some aspects of gender identity formation are biologically induced, such as the differing levels of aggression in both sexes. One could also note that biological nature may not be the sole factor influencing gender identity formation and that any differences between the sexes are more complex than simple biological make-up, as suggested by Williams and Best.

However, due to the lack of internal and external validity and Gewertz and Bamberger's contradictory findings, the evidence appears to support gender identity formation as a biological process, which is represented across every culture. Biosocial Theory Biosocial theory, in contrast to Sociobiological theory, attempts to combine elements of biological and socialization approaches. It maintains that the biological traits are the basis of gender identity differences and that they have a significant impact upon its formation. The theory argues that both sexes are 'genetically programmed' for particular gender-roles, consistent with conventional sex-roles. An ideal way of testing this approach would be to study individuals in whom there is a clear distinction between sexual identities i. e. male or female and the way in which they were treated socially. Thus, for example, if an individual was born a boy but was treated as a girl, would biological or social factors be more important in their gender identity formation? The categorisation of both sexes as having their own masculine and feminine behaviours is so heavily laden with value judgments and stereotyping that considering cross-gender behavioural patterns in children, as abnormal may seem unjustified. But some data suggests suggest that these patterns can come from a physical disturbance. Specifically, evidence indicates that gender identity is influenced by hormones. One study demonstrating this point was conducted by John Money[4], and the subject was the sex reassignment of David Reimer. Born a healthy male, Reimer was sexually reassigned and raised as female after his penis was accidentally destroyed during circumcision. Dr Money oversaw the case and reported the reassignment as successful, and as evidence that gender identity is primarily learned, not innate. Dr Diamond

later reported that Reimer failed to identify as female since the age of nine to eleven, and began living as male at age fifteen. Reimer later went public with his story to discourage similar medical practices. He later committed suicide, owing to suffering years of severe depression. Clearly, this case demonstrates a strong biological underpinning for gender identity; despite undergoing gender reassignment surgery, being encouraged to behave in a feminine way, and developing breasts as a result of hormone therapy, John never developed a female gender identity (Colapinto, 1997). The case was fundamentally flawed. It can be criticized on several ethical grounds.

According to the British and American Psychological Associations, informed consent must be obtained from all those who wish to participate and deception must be avoided. Neither of these guidelines were followed; Reimer was only told the truth about his actual biological sex at age fifteen, and suffered psychological harm as a result. However, the importance of this controversial study cannot go unmentioned; it has increased our knowledge of processes relating to development and the biological significance of behaviour. The research has also benefitted the scientific community in terms of humane treatment of human participants inside the context of research. Of particular interest is the fairly direct conflict between biological and social factors; it seems as if biological nature outweighs environmental nurture. However, evidence in support of the biological approach to gender development has been obtained from animal studies. For instance, Young, Goy and Phoenix (1964) gave doses of testosterone to pregnant monkeys; this male sex hormone produced greater aggressiveness and higher frequency of rough-and-tumble play in the mothers' female offspring. It needs

to be remembered that, similar to Mead's (1935) study, the relevant evidence supporting the socialization approach (Dr Money) has been obtained from a very unusual case, with sample size being so small, unreliable conclusions might be drawn as the findings can be generalised to the average population. In addition, the research carried out on animals (Young, Goy and Phoenix (1964)) was done so because it was considered unethical to conduct the same research on humans; for the reason that, there is an assertion that animals and humans are fundamentally different in terms of consciousness or ability to feel pain. So surely, due to the difference, it is not valid to generalise from animals to humans. The biological approach thus links any sex differences (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974) to genetics. In this instance, one can conclude that, according to the biosocial theory and as evidenced by Young, Goy and Phoenix (1964), biological nature has a significant impact upon gender identity differences. Due to the lack of ecological validity and reliability in Imperato-McGinley et al.'s (1979) study, one could argue that, on average, nurture environment has very little or no effect on gender identity formation. However, it is important to note that biological theories cannot provide more than a partial explanation. Such theories do not explain the impact of social factors on gender identity formation and they do not account for the substantial changes in gender roles that have occurred in Western societies in recent decades. Psychoanalytic Feminism and Abnormal Psychology As part of normal sexual functioning, each individual has sexual preferences and fantasies. However, when our desires begin affecting us and/or others in unwanted and/or harmful ways, they qualify as abnormal. A range of human

sexual thoughts, feeling, and actions are considered dysfunctional and listed by DSM-IV[5] as sexual and gender identity disorders. A point that contradicts the social learning theory relates to sexual identity. Paraphilia[6] such as fetishism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, are not socially constructed and are therefore not considered normative behaviour. Thus, it implies a hereditary influence. However, feminist interpretations (e. g. Unger, 1979) of sex differences share the belief that social, political, economic and cultural factors determine gender, our awareness and understanding of the differences of distinguishing males from females. This view is directly opposed to sociobiological theory. In 1979, Rhoda Unger published 'Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender in Psychology', a paper that formally introduced psychologists to distinction between biological sex and gender identity. Feminist psychologists argue that gender is socially constructed within a culture of patriarchy, and is hence deeply political, rather than individual or personal. This contributed to the argument that gender identity is not biologically determined by gender per se, but is socially produced. It has roots in Sigmund Freud's work, whereby gender is not a biologically determined phenomenon. This psychosexual development leads to the gender role adoption. Childhood experiences are accountable for making males believe that they are masculine and females believe that they are feminine; this subsequently leads to gender inequality. The situation is a result of a male dominated society. It strives to explain how socio-political structures interrupt the engendering process, whereby we become more complicit with and resistant to cultural norms. It argues that sexual differences are not biological 'givens' or social roles, but that they occur as

a result of the contested terrain of human subjectivity. Social Learning Theory According to social learning theory, the development of gender occurs as a result of the child's social experiences; suggesting that the sexes behave differently as a result of direct tuition (sex typing) by their parents, while young (Smith & Lloyd, 1978). It emphasises the roles of observational learning and reinforcement (Bandura, 1997) and attempts to explain how social structures, raised by psychoanalytic feminism, influences gender identity formation. In the 'Baby X' study (Smith & Lloyd, 1978), babies were dressed in unisex outfits and given names which, at times matched their correct sex and at other times didn't. When adults played with them, they treated the babies according to the sex they believed them to be. This indicates that a person's (perceived) biological make-up becomes part of his/her social environment through others' reactions. Sears et al (1957) found that parents allowed sons to be more aggressive in their relationships than with their daughters. Although parents believe that they respond in the same way to aggressive acts committed by both sexes, they actually intervene more frequently and quickly with girls. In contrast, Maccoby & Jacklin (1974) suggest there are no consistent differences in the extent to which both sexes are reinforced for aggressiveness. Rather, there appears to be remarkable consistency in the sexes' socialisation. Boys are more likely to imitate aggressive male models than are girls (Bandura et al., 1961, 1963). Children are also more likely to imitate a same-sex model than an opposite-sex model, even if the behaviour is 'sex-appropriate'. However, the evidence concerning imitation and modelling is actually inconclusive, and some studies have failed to find that children are more likely to imitate

same-sex models than opposite-sex models. Indeed, children have been shown to prefer imitating behaviour that is 'appropriate' to their own sex regardless of that of their models' (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Further, Sears et al (1957) and Bandura et al (1961, 1963) conducted laboratory experiments, whereby there was a lack of internal and ecological validity. It may have been inappropriate to generalise from the artificial environment to the real-life one, where the results apply. For instance, the parents (Sears et al) may have changed their behaviour, as a result of the situation and this may have resulted in the Hawthorne effect whereby participants act in a way they think meets the expectations of the researcher. One of the strengths of the social learning theory is that it takes into account the social context in which the development occurs. However, the theory has several limitations. Durkin (1995) stated that research has "not lead led consistently to the conclusion that they have a major influence". Secondly, far from children passively acquiring through reward and punishment, they are actively involved in their development (Bandura, 1986). And finally, it also assumes learning processes are the same across all age groups, which is incorrect as they vary (Kohlberg, 1966). We can see that a child's behaviour, environment, and personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other. The findings support the role of environmental nurture, in the form of reinforcement, in gender identity formation. However, it somewhat dismisses the influence of biological nature by not addressing it. Concluding Statements In conclusion, in accordance with the sociobiological theory, biosocial theory and abnormal psychology, there appears to be a fundamental biological component to gender identity formation that

underpins gender development. However, the social learning theory and psychoanalytic feminism suggests that there are alternative factors that play crucial roles in this developmental process such as social, political, economic and cultural experiences. There is evidence of extensive theory, data and researcher triangulation; whereby different theoretical approaches, researchers and different sources of data, are used to address a single situation, in this case, to what extent biological nature determines gender identity formation. These multidimensional perspectives enhance the credibility of the conclusions, the trustworthiness of the claims and eliminates threats of bias. This knowledge could benefit the education system and help improve cognitive development in young children; for instance, it could assist educators in promoting equality in the classroom by being aware of their own stereotypes, by introducing instructional material free of stereotypes and by constructing learning activities that allow both genders to succeed. All of these theoretical approaches have an important role to play in understanding the roots of children's gender development. We should not regard one as right, or better than the others, nor should they be seen as necessarily in conflict with one another (Maccoby, 2000). However, to what extent cognition itself, impacts upon gender identity formation has not been addressed; this is an unresolved question and would form future research to address this void. It may be the case that some aspects of gender development have their roots in evolutionary processes, some in the effect of hormones on the developing brain, some in the reinforcement provided by others, and some in the observation and imitation of gendered behaviour. There is no reason to think that biological nature and

environmental nurture are not both involved in the process of a child's gender identity development. Overall, one can see that gender identity formation is not solely caused by biological nature, another non-biological variable impacts on the forming of an individual's gender identity, environmental nurture. All of these explanations help shape our understanding of gender identity formation; they are all equally valid, and show us that it is the interaction of these variables that helps form gender identity. It is the opinion of the author that biological factors establish the foundations upon which the gender identity is formed; whether this is as a result of extraneous environmental factors or social and cultural influences; it remains to be demonstrated with any conviction. While biological factors do certainly determine some aspects of gender, gender identity itself is produced in the interaction of biological sex and the environmental and cultural circumstances in which psychological development occurs. From this, I conclude that biological nature only determines gender identity formation to a limited extent as the theories explored above have given us multiple explanations as to the ultimate formation of gender identity formation, not just one.